

Bessie Roy

By E. Lynn Linton

The month after this trial, Bessie Roy, nurreych (nurse) to the Leslies of Balquhain, was “dilatit” for sorcery generally, and specially for being “a common awa-taker of women’s milk.” She took away poor Bessie Steel’s, when she came to ask alms, and only restored it again when she was afraid of getting into trouble for the fault. She was also accused of having, “by the space of tual yeiris sync or thairby,” past to the field with other women to pluck lint, but instead of following her lawful occupation, she had made “ane compass (circle) in the eird, and ane hoill in the middis thairof;” out of which hole came, first, a great worm which crept over the boundary, then a little worm, which crept over it also, and last of all another great worm, “quhill could nocht pas owre the compas, nor cum out of the hoill, but fell doune and deit.” Which enchantment or sorcery being interpreted meant, by the first worm, William King, who should live; by the second small worm, the unborn babe, of which no one yet knew the coming life; and by the third large worm the gude wyffe herself, who should die as soon as she was delivered. Notwithstanding the gravity and circumstantiality of these charges, Bessie Roy marvelously escaped the allotted doom, and was pronounced innocent. “Quhairvpoune the said Bessie askit act and instrument.” Two women tried the day before, Jonet Grant and Jonet Clark, were less fortunate. Charged with laming men and women by their devilish arts—whereof was no attempt at proof—they were convicted and burnt; as also was Meg Dow, in April of the same year, for the “crewel murdreissing of twa young infant bairns,” by magic.

And now we come to a very singular group of trials, opened out by that clumsy, superstitious pedant, whose name stands accursed for vice and cruel cowardice and the utmost selfishness of fear—James VI. of Scotland. If anything were wanting to complete one’s abhorrence of Carr’s patron and Raleigh’s murderer—one’s contempt of the upholder of the divine right of kings in his own self-adoration as God’s vicegerent upon earth—it would be his part in the witch delusion of the sixteenth century. Whatever of blood-stained folly belonged specially to the Scottish trials of this time—and hereafter—owed its original impulse to him; and every groan of the tortured wretches driven to their fearful doom, and every tear of the survivors left blighted and desolate to drag out their weary days in mingled grief and terror, lie on his memory with shame and condemnation ineffaceable for all time.